

HEALING GARDEN FOR SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT

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SEXUAL ASSAULT

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ABSTRACT

The development and impacts of participation in a healing garden group for survivors of interpersonal violence were studied. The healing garden group focused on reconnection with self, others, and community as outlined in Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*. Using Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) methodology, a healing garden group was developed with four survivors, including the author as a participant-researcher. The participants met weekly throughout the summer of 2012 with meetings audio recorded and field notes kept. Data was analyzed using constant comparison analysis (CCA). The gardening group was found to be beneficial to the participants as survivor group for reconnection for those who are further in their healing process. Benefits occurred within two dialectics: trauma and recovery and garden and group. Themes associated with trauma and recovery were safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection. Associated with garden and group were anxiety, benefits, and mindfulness.

DEDICATION

To the women of the Unicorn Healing Garden Project.

PREFACE

“Gardens are a particular product of the interaction of people and place. Thus, garden research takes one to people and to places.”

-Kenneth Helphand *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime*

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The garden research produced in this thesis brought to light how a garden project can be undertaken and documented the benefits for participants. The project grew up and around a theoretical trellis of Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), the impacts of nature and of violence against women, and the dialectic of trauma. The frameworks I chose enabled the garden research to be inclusive, participatory, collaborative, and empowering. This choice led me to the search for theory and methods that privileged the participants' experiences in their role as knowledge creators. Weekly meetings based on focus groups and consciousness-raising groups were used for this reason. Connected to the goals of the research and theoretical trellis was my choice of analysis. Constant Comparison Analysis (CCA) privileges the participant and their knowledge through the analysis process. The garden research sought to answer three questions related to active participation in a garden group: 1) What was the process of creating a healing garden utilizing FPAR methods; 2) What were the impacts of gardening and exposure to nature for participants; and 3) What were the impacts of active participation in a group with other survivors?

Through the research, we discovered that the process of active group participation can be frustrating at times due to the fluid nature of FPAR, but with communication and collaboration, we also discovered that these challenges were a useful method for our work as survivors. Being in the garden was relaxing, uplifting, and peaceful for us. Through our discussions we also found the garden group as a safe space to discuss our experiences as survivors in our daily lives and in relation to society. The goal for participants in the FPAR Healing Garden was to develop a garden which provided a safe space for survivors to foster a sense of community as well as explore any impacts of exposure to nature through gardening and involvement in the project.

In the spring of 2012, four women came together to interact with a specific place in order to create a *particular product*: a garden space where the needs of plants and people were carefully tended. The place this garden research takes us to is a community garden during a specific time marked by growth—both physical and emotional. In three garden plots, physical transformations took place for alphabet themed plants: the U plot transformed by unicorn plants, members of the umbrelafræ family (parsley), and ultraviolet marine petunias; the X plot transformed by xanthene orange marigolds; and the Y plot transformed by yam vines, yucca, and yarrow. The emotional growth brings us to the particular people of this garden research: four survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV). These women sought to continue their healing journey as they worked through different stages. The emotional growth also sprung from what we could and could not control in and out of gardening and research. Throughout the process of planning, planting, and tending the garden and imagining what a healing garden project could be, the four women of this garden research came to create a particular product cultivated out of interaction between individual participants, the group, the community, and the garden: the Unicorn Healing Garden Project.

The name we gave our healing garden research came out of a discussion of the resiliency of both plants and people—a conversation which connected us even more to the garden and each other. One of the participants told us of a conversation she had with a friend about social interaction. Her friend misconstrued her point and said, “You need someone to see you as a beautiful flower standing alone in a field.” She told the rest of the group, “I don’t need someone to tell me I’m beautiful... What I want is someone to ask how did that flower get there?” In her interactions with others she sought to connect on a deeper level where the people she met would take time to get to know her and her story. Her story led me to a tangentially related thought,

“What bothers me,” I told the group, “is how people always talk about how beautiful flowers are and how they and women are seen as delicate when they are actually very resilient. Look at our garden, the unicorn plants were nearly dead when we planted them and now look at how much they have grown.” As I spoke, I realized how these flowers were like the women of the garden group who came together every week to discuss our experiences as survivors of IPV. Through this conversation and many others we had over the course of six months of gardening work, we decided that just as we named our experiences, we would name our group. The Unicorn Healing Project was chosen to exemplify the resiliency of plants and people and the importance of the nature-human connection.

We decided to name our group in hopes to become more integrated into the community. Throughout the project we made suggestions for the future in order to create a healing garden with permanence and a group with presence. It was in one of our last meetings where we made our name and mission official. Hepatica¹ shared her suggestion for our group’s mission statement, “I thought of the name Unicorn Group. The reason why I thought of it was because of the plant and how we—when we got it, it was soft and delicate and then it grew into something strong and mature. So, I came up with an acronym that probably doesn't really give the whole picture but I just got to thinking what brought me to the group, what happened with me, especially with the group, and what I got out of it and now we're looking to help others,” And what she shared would come to encompass as we hoped to achieve in our group:

¹ The participants were given pseudonyms based on a garden theme. Names chosen were all flowers with symbolism related to important concepts for the group. Hepatica symbolizes confidence; Bryony support; Fern sincerity. For more explanation, see Methods.

The UNICORN Group:

U- Understanding Ourselves

N- Need to Heal

I- Identities Given Back

C- Controlling Our Own Lives

O- Open to Helping Others

R- Reaching Out to the Community

N- Need to Grow

We became very excited by her mission statement and decided to incorporate it into the group with one change suggested by Bryony: to call it a project. She thought it made the group sound more inclusive to highlight that healing itself is an ongoing project.

In our gardens, we saw a reflection of ourselves. Our lives spent trying to clear out the weeds which threatened to overtake us. Through counseling and the healing garden, we were able to cultivate ourselves through self-care. Weeds still existed as we worked both side-by-side and alone in the garden, but we were rebounding and blooming despite our experiences with IPV. The particular product which will unfold here is a story of resiliency and growth documented through the use of audio recorded weekly meetings throughout the 2012 growing season as well as memos which were utilized throughout the entire process between October 2011 and December 2012.

The research is also a *particular product* of multiple frameworks built around a number of dialectical topics focused on people and nature, trauma and recovery, and process and action. Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), Judith Herman's dialectic of trauma, the impacts of violence against women, and the impacts of nature to heal framed the foundation of

the subsequent action that took place within the garden that summer. The four women who participated in garden research also blossomed throughout a growing season through communion with nature, community, and each other. This thesis was one product of the fruits of our labor.



Figure 1. The alphabet garden. This collage shows our plots before and after planting.

CHAPTER 2: CONSTRUCTING THE TRELLIS

To cultivate garden research such as this, the research was supported by a theoretical trellis where the project spread over and around during its multiple stages and subsequent changes. Interwoven throughout the project sociological, feminist, environmental, and psychological frameworks. The trellis was constructed from Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR), Dorothy Smith's standpoint theory, literature on the impacts of engagement with nature and violence against women, and Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*. I utilized theories from multiple disciplines incorporated to cultivate a healing journey through a sociological lens. With this theoretical foundation, I sought to understand the connections between individual trauma and larger societal issues and explore the possibility of the restorative environment to complement the individual healing journey. The complementary topics vined upon the trellis to create the Unicorn Healing Garden Project.

Utilizing women's standpoint theory in research on survivors enabled the women participating to claim their own subject position and recognize their authority as experts of their own experiences. An understanding of the dialectic of trauma and recovery facilitates an understanding of the healing journey and the work needed to traverse that path. It is from here a FPAR community garden project focused on recovery based on the expertise of survivors began. Gardening as a healing tool has been utilized in a number of populations throughout history, including those who have survived traumatic experiences, yet research on the topic with survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence engaging in gardening is lacking. More research is needed to explore whether participating in a community garden could provide similar benefits to survivors as have been documented in other populations. The Healing Garden pilot

group utilizing FPAR grounded in women's standpoint theory proposed was a step in addressing the gap in the research.

Feminist Participatory Action Research

Participatory action research (PAR) is a flexible, cyclical, reflexive, and collaborative design with the goals of doing research and creating solutions in ways that are equitable, democratic, and life enhancing (Herr & Anderson, 2005; McIntyre, 2008; & Stringer, 2007). It makes those who were once relegated to the status of subjects become full participants in the research process. This happens through a process of including them in the research (Herr & Anderson, 2007). For those who participate in this form of research, the goal is to establish an equitable, democratic, and life enhancing project that questions what knowledge is, who creates or owns knowledge, and how knowledge has been used to "represent the interests of the powerful and serve to reinforce their position in society" (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2004, p.854). Participatory research affirms the experiences of those who are impacted by an issue by viewing those stakeholders as experts of their own experiences. Through the collaborative research process, participants are empowered to speak on their situations and to actively produce improvements in those situations, thus giving them control over their own lives (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2004; Stringer, 2007).

Action is gained through the reflexivity and flexibility which produces the cyclical nature of the research process. At each stage of the research, data is collected and analyzed with potential for action developed. The next stages involve collecting and analyzing data of the resulting action from the previous cycle. The findings of each stage can cause a number of changes to the research including new research goals, questions, or theoretical concepts and frameworks. This can make an action research project challenging. There are guidelines for

doing PAR, but no hard and fast rules, and each action research project looks different from the next and draws on a variety of data collection methods. This is why proponents of action research argue for thinking of the transferability of the process rather than the generalizability of the results.

There are three key components to any PAR project. The first key component is *participation by those who have a stake* in the issue or problem being researched (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Stringer, 2007; McIntyre, 2008). It is a more collaborative participation found in other forms of research. Involvement in the research process by stakeholders may take place throughout every stage of the research process from determining the problem to dissemination of findings, to a varying degree (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993; Herr & Anderson, 2005; Stringer, 2007). The second component is its *primary focus on local solutions* to the issues and problems, rather than concern for generalizability (Stringer, 2007). The knowledge of all stakeholders are valued and included in order to create solutions which are relevant to their lived experiences (Greenwood, Whyte, & Harkavy, 1993). The third component is its *reflexive nature*; both researchers and participants reflect on their influence on the research process and the ways in which the research changes them (Herr & Anderson, 2005; Stringer, 2007; McIntyre, 2008).

Feminist Participatory Action Research is a subset of participatory action research which combines its goals and characteristics with those of feminist theory and methodology. According to Reid, Tom, & Frisby (2006), “FPAR is a conceptual and methodological framework that enables a critical understanding of women’s multiple perspectives and works towards inclusion, participation, and action, while confronting the underlying assumptions researchers bring into the research process” (p. 316). FPAR, as in PAR, knowledge is created with the participants in all

stages of the research, including gathering and analyzing the research (Baum, McDougal, & Smith, 2006; Mason & Clemans, 2008; Reid, et al., 2006). FPAR, like PAR, is a highly reflexive process which allows for the researcher the space to confront her assumptions, as well as opens the door for change in the researcher. Research on survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence using FPAR would view participants as agents of knowledge and experts of their own experiences, rather than assuming the researcher the only one who has expertise on the subject.

FPAR has been used in research with survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. According to Naples & Clark (1996), “Feminist participatory research with adult survivors and other women who experienced violence against them is a strategy that offers the potential for generating survivor-centered discourses” (p. 177). Mason & Clemens (2008), allows the participants’ narratives to be used to create a research document for future survivors. Feminist participatory action research has four major characteristics: (1) Participation in research, (2) consciousness raising and education, (3) inclusion of popular knowledge, and (4) cultivation of a critical consciousness (Cancian, 1996). The inclusion of survivors in the research process allows for their empowerment and healing.

As mentioned above, FPAR utilizes feminist theory while actively engaging stakeholders. Standpoint theory was a particular theory with which I engaged for the garden research. Women’s standpoint theory is a sociological approach based on the actual, everyday experiences of women (Smith, 1996; Smith, 2005). Standpoint theory starts with micro level experiences of people in order to understand their situated position within larger society. Smith’s “alternative sociology” arose out of the consciousness raising efforts of the women’s movement, when women began to understand the ways in which their daily lives were structured by ruling

relations (Smith, 2005). Smith (2005) defines the ruling relations as, “forms of consciousness and organization that are objectified in the sense that they are constituted externally to particular people and places” (p.13). Rather than being a mode of domination, it is a mode of organization which creates subject positions. In relation to women, it has organized women’s lives into subject positions relegated to the private sphere of the home as wives and mothers. It was through the work of the women’s movement in opposition to the ruling relations that women were able to claim a subject position within the public sphere. Women’s empowerment came through becoming authorities of their own knowledge, rather than being excluded from knowledge production, or knowledge created by patriarchal academic disciplines. Women’s standpoint theory makes the everyday world a problematic, or “project of research and discovery” (Smith, 1996, p.24). Women become experts of their own experiences. Knowledge creation starts with their narratives of their lives.

The Unicorn Healing Garden Project was created to provide a space for women in the same recovery stage to be a part of a group based on commonality. This survivor group wanted to engage with nature to facilitate healing and reconnect with other survivors as well as the larger community. The stakeholders were the survivors themselves who actively participated in a collaborative manner to take the research as originally designed to its end stage. Through our time in the garden we experienced many of the benefits cited in the literature including a sense of safety, connection with others, decreased anxiety and increased sense of relaxation and mindfulness. In group meetings we discussed our subject positions as women and survivors while engaged in the empowering act of knowledge creation together.

Impact of Exposure to Nature

Interaction with nature can either be passive or active, both of which have mental health benefits. Passive exposure to nature includes viewing nature scenes in pictures or resting in a natural setting. Active exposure to nature includes walking, hiking, running, gardening or farming (Groenwegen, Berg, Vries, & Verhiej, 2006; Maller, Townsend, Pryor, Brown & St. Leger, 2005; Pretty, Peacock, Sellens, & Griffin, 2005). Documented benefits of passive and active exposure to nature include reduced levels of stress, anxiety, mental fatigue, and other mental illnesses; increased feelings of personal well-being, relaxation, self-esteem. Social benefits include increased feelings of safety, community integration, social interaction, and community cohesion (Dunnet & Qasim, Groenwegen, et al., 2006; Kaplan, 1973; Kaplan, 1995; Perrins-Margalias, Rugletic, Schepis, Stepanski, & Walsh, 2000; Pretty, et al., 2005; Sempik, 2010; Walizeck, Zajicek, Linberger, 2005).

Passive exposure of nature make use of restorative landscapes, or spaces not created for working in the space, but the experience of it. Restorative landscapes are separate from horticultural therapy where active engagement with nature comes from working the land in order to use space to create a particular product. It can range from a large, planned garden outside a healthcare facility to simply the view of outside one's window (Spriggs-Gerlach, Kaufman, Bass Warner, 2004). Restorative gardens have been used since medieval times for its healing benefits in populations from the mentally ill to the elderly (Spriggs-Gerlach, et. al, 2004). In ancient Egypt, restorative landscapes were utilized by court physicians who prescribed walks in the palace garden for the mentally ill (Davis, 1998). In the 1700s, British hospitals built gardens next to hospitals and their use with the mentally ill became popular, but saw a decline with the advent of pharmaceutical treatments (Stigsdotter & Grahn, 2002). In World War I & II, community

gardens were used for veterans physically disabled in the wars (Davis, 1998). Since the 1990s, gardens as a healing mechanism for physical and mental impairments have seen an increase (Kavanaugh, 1995). Recently, the benefits have been expanded to include those who have experienced trauma, including war veterans suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The act of gardening has also been used as a healing tool utilized in a number of populations, including those who have survived traumatic experiences, Its use as a “planned activity” became especially popular in the early twentieth century during and after the two world wars. The use of gardening with veterans has again been explored more recently. The history of passive and active exposure to nature led to the use of gardens with survivors of sexual assault and domestic abuse, though more research on the subject is needed.

In the UK in 2007, The Gardening Leave Project was developed with a pilot group in order to understand the benefits of nature for veterans experiencing “combat related mental health problems” (Atkison, 2009, p.3). The pilot group was developed by Combat Stress, a mental health welfare group for former military members. The garden was provided as an extra service along with existing services such as “psychiatric support and occupation therapy to help veterans rebuild their lives and provide a break for the families of traumatized veterans” (Combat Stress qtd in Atkison, 2009, p.2). The site of the pilot garden project was Hollybrook House where veterans stayed for up to six weeks, generally staying one to two weeks at a time. Veterans participated in activities such as planting and growing flowers and plants, maintaining their poppy collection, restoring a stove house, and fishing. Veterans can visit the garden for a half or whole day depending on the schedules of their other therapy sessions. The Garden Leave project was found to provide structure that was missing for veterans after their time in the military as well as “helping with concentration levels, relieving high stress levels, positively

affecting mood, and giving veterans back a sense of pride and achievement” (Atkison, 2009, p.4).

Other garden projects which seek to provide healing benefits to those who have experienced trauma are the Amazing Heart CSA, Project Grow, and The Homewood Health Centre. The Amazing Heart CSA (n.d.) in Pennsylvania was created as a place for those suffering from trauma or loss to experience the therapeutic benefits of the physical and creative work of gardening. The garden provides a safe space for community members who have dealt with trauma or loss to heal.

Stuart (2005) documented Project Grow which sought to connect survivors of domestic violence and their children to nature in order to “provide fresh opportunities for therapy, recreation, education, and cultural exchange” (p. 61). In a study of California shelters which were part of Project Grow, survivors were interviewed or surveyed on the benefits of having a garden on site. The psychological and therapeutic benefits were cited as the main effects of the garden with educational benefits and ability to obtain fresh food the second and third main effect of the garden.

The Homewood Health Centre is a six week program geared towards recovery from PTSD (Hewson, 2001). There are individual therapy sessions, but the Centre also places a strong emphasis of fostering a sense of community between its patients. This facility located in Ontario provides patients with the ability to relax in landscaped environments as well as participate in gardening activities. Through these garden activities, patients build their self-esteem, relax, engage in positive interactions, and develop an identity which does not have the traumatic experiences at its core. Hewson (2001) had survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence as

patients at Homewood, along with others who suffered from PTSD stemming from other forms of trauma.

The Unicorn Healing Garden built on the long history the benefits of nature on the healing process, whether it be physical, mental, or emotional. The effects of trauma can be mitigated through restorative landscapes and healing gardens. The garden research developed for this project had the added benefit of active collaboration with the planning process as well as active participation with nature. Although there is research on the benefits of nature for survivors of patriarchal trauma, more is necessary. Though the Unicorn Project adds to the body of literature, there are many avenues future research could take.

Impact of Violence against Women

Violence against women—a term encompassing sexual assault and domestic violence—serves to perpetuate the inequality of women. The subordination can come directly in the form of a threat by a partner, assault by a stranger for perceived behaviors, or fear of transgressing gender norms (Watts & Zimmerman, 2002). The domination of men by women is perpetuated by the self/other dichotomy which enables men's power through sexuality whereas women are defined in the terms of male sexuality (Mackinnon, 1989). The sexual power dichotomy constitutes a rape culture in which women live with the fact that rape is a common occurrence (Burnett & Kahl, 2010). The prevalence of violence against women as well as the stereotypes and myths that place blame onto the victim are evidence of the rape culture.

Women who have been sexually, physically, and/or emotionally abused experience a number of impacts on their mental health. According to one study, “Beyond the abuse itself, other physical and mental problems incurred by female victims of domestic violence include fatigue, backaches, headaches, general restlessness, and the inability to sleep” (Wesely, Allison,

&Schneider, 2000). Survivors of intimate partner violence and sexual assault have also developed anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, suicidal tendencies, and PTSD (Briere & Jordan, 2004; Browne, 1993; Campbell, 2002; Campbell & Lewandowski, 1997; Coker, et al, 2002; Koss, 1993; Mechanic, Weaver, & Resick, 2008). While not all women who have been victimized experience post-traumatic mental health effects, it is a prevalent occurrence (Dutton, 2009). Many factors affect the prevalence and intensity for individual mental health impacts. According to Campbell, Dworkin, & Capbral (2009), there are six interconnected levels which contribute to level of mental health impacts post-assault. These are the characteristics of (1) the individual, including sociodemographic variables as well as previous mental health issues, and coping skills; (2) the assault, including the presence of substance abuse and threats of physical harm; (3) the presence of informal support from friends, family, and peers (microsystem); (4) the level of formal support from areas such the medical and legal fields (meso/exosystem); (5) the societal norms surrounding violence against women (macrosystem); and finally, (6) the chronosystem which include cumulative effects of victimization, as well as other normative and non-normative events in the woman's life.

Dialectic of Trauma

Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery* (1997) looks at trauma from at micro and macro levels. The work centers around two themes pertinent to my research: the dialectic of trauma and recovery. Through the dialectic of trauma she explains how both survivors and society are affected by trauma. Reconnection happens on individual and social level as well, namely connecting the dramatic experience of an individual to the larger social context. Recovery is about healing the disconnection and isolation of the survivor.

There are two central dialectics of trauma which are felt on micro and macro levels and are interrelated. The first dialectic is *secrecy and truth*. On an individual level this refers to the survivors back and forth between putting her experiences into narrative form and keeping her story to herself. Herman (1997) states because a survivor's story is often fragmented, emotional, confusing and possibly contradictory suspicion or judgment maybe cast, which pushes the survivor back into secrecy. On a societal level there is secrecy and truth telling as well. The denial of atrocities, whether it be genocide, war, or gender violence; then the breaking of silence to make the world privy to humanity's dark side. According to Herman, recovery begins both individually and societally when the past is claimed and the truth is told. The second central dialectic is of *intrusion and constriction*. Intrusion is memories of the trauma forcing their way into the survivor's consciousness. Constriction is the process of pushing those memories out of conscious. On a societal level, this happens as well. The truth of trauma imposes itself on our collective conscious and as we attempt to rationalize and/or forget we enact the constriction process. In order to provide balance between the two, as is a goal in recovery, survivors and society must claim, share, and remember traumatic experiences.

At the core of *Trauma and Recovery* is "restoring connections: between the private and public world, between the individual and community, between men and women" (p. 3). Working towards these connections are facilitated through working in survivor groups based on the needs and healing journey of the individual. The first two connections are the primary focus of the healing garden project. According to Herman, "The solidarity of a group provides the strongest protection against terror and despair, and the strongest antidote to traumatic experience" (p. 214). Through group work, survivors can alleviate the isolation incurred by trauma. Reconnection is necessary for recovery. Groups provide a space to gain a sense of safety, share her story, mourn

her fractured identity, and a place to engage with others to develop interpersonal relationships. The purpose of these groups is to provide a sense of commonality therefore groups should be developed with this in mind to ensure its members are in similar stages in their recovery process.



Figure 2. State trivia. A photograph of a small stool located in the alphabet garden.

CHAPTER 3: THE LAY OF THE LAND

The *particular product* created in the summer and fall of 2012 was a time intensive and often changing process due to the use of action research. Due to this, the research design began shortly into graduate school, even before the research proposal. This project took place in three stages—planning, planting, and processing—with the recognition of the flexible and cyclical nature of PAR (Herr & Anderson, 2006; Stringer, 2007). The methods included participant observation and group meetings. Data sources were transcriptions of meetings and field notes. As FPAR seeks to diminish the dichotomy of researcher-researched, my position as an insider-researcher was continuously negotiated and reflected upon.

Group Members

The garden group included three participants other than myself. In order to protect their confidentiality, pseudonyms are used. I was deliberate in which names were chosen for the group. Flowers throughout history have held importance in their symbolism. In the Victorian era, “flower symbolism became particularly elaborate” (Diffenbaugh, 2011, Forward, para 14). With this knowledge, I felt it appropriate to choose flora themed names for the group based on their meanings which I felt espoused the spirit of their presence in our group.

Fern, Hepatica, and Bryony were chosen after careful consideration. Fern means sincerity (Kirby, 2011). This name was chosen because for Fern, the group member, sincerity in all aspects of her life was of the utmost importance especially in regards the knowledge created in our group. Hepatica means confidence (Greenway, 1885) and was chosen after a meeting where we reflected upon the impacts of the garden where we all expressed an increase in confidence. The woman given the name Hepatica felt an increased confidence an especially important benefit of her time in the garden group. Bryony means be my support (Ildrewe, 1874). Each of us has

played a support role for each other throughout the study, which led to other key characteristics of the group: trust, respect, and healing. The woman given the name Bryony was often a source of support and encouragement for the rest of the group, especially for Fern and myself, who were the youngest of the group, whenever we doubted ourselves and our ongoing journey as survivors and young women.

For a time, I thought about giving myself a pseudonym and write about my role in the project separately as a researcher and participant. This was a consideration of my own confidentiality as a participant and ease some of my anxieties about doing research in insider-insider research. I chose the name Hawthorne for myself because of its symbolism of hope. In the end, I decided against the separation of my identity into researcher and participant. Trauma fractures the identity while a goal of recovery is to reconnect the disassociated selves. In the spirit of doing insider FPAR research and recovery work, I decided against the separation of my identity into researcher and participant in order to become an observant participant.

Transparency in my position as a researcher and participant was essential the garden research to remain true to FPAR. Within this research process, a researcher may hold multiple positionalities that may change throughout the research process and it was important to work through these shifting positions with my collaborators. A researcher's positionality rests on a continuum (Herr & Anderson, 2006). For much of the project, I often spoke of doing insider-insider research, but I realized upon reflection throughout the process that my positionality fluctuated. When I first began my research, I saw myself as an outside academic in collaboration with insiders hoping to facilitate change on an individual and community level. As we moved forward with garden planning, I transitioned from outsider to insider as I disclosed my experiences of being a survivor and felt many of the benefits of nature and engagement in the

group. The decision to disclose to other the participants came from a desire to build trust and rapport within the group. I also chose to do so to achieve the goals of insider research to "engage in inquiry in ways that help the group from working as isolated individuals toward a collaborative community"

Data Sources

Data came from 14 weekly meetings and participant observation time spent together as a group or in pairs in the garden. The research meetings were recorded and transcribed. Field notes were either hand written or recorded then transcribed. Another data source for the project were research notes during the meetings in each of the stages as well as field notes from participant observation in the garden. Notes were both hand written and electronic.

During the majority of the meetings participants chose discussion topics to structure our discussions. In other meetings we had discussions about our time spent in the gardens, as well our personal experiences. At the beginning, midpoint, and end of the growing season discussions about the group and garden process were discussed for comparison purposes, as well as for potential change and action. These meetings were designed with both the format of focus groups utilized in social science and consciousness-raising groups of the women's movement. This style of meeting was chosen rather than one-on-one interviews for two reasons which are in congruence with the use of FPAR methods. My first reason was related to the participatory nature of focus groups and consciousness-raising group. Focus groups provide an opportunity for "public participation in the research process" (Bloor, et al., 2001, p. 13). In this way, focus groups are an opportunity for research participants to come together to socialize during a certain amount of time and require no special skills on the part of the participants. Consciousness-raising groups allowed for the public participation by women in disclosing, naming, and documenting

instances of rape and abuse within a group of peers rather than in psychoanalysts office (Herman, 1997). The participatory nature of both these methods align with FPAR's focus on solutions found by stakeholders who are viewed as experts of their own experiences, therefore PAR and other subsets of AR, like FPAR are often used in groups (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002; Mason & Clemans, 2008).

My second reason for the use of focus and consciousness-raising groups as the foundation for my method was their use in research with marginalized groups (Fossey, et al., 2002). One explanation given by Fossey, et. al. (2002) for this use is because people may feel more comfortable talking about a sensitive issue in the presence of those who have similar experiences. Consciousness-raising groups provided a space for women to come together and discuss their lived experiences in order to “overcome the barriers of denial, secrecy, and shame that prevented them from naming their injuries” (Herman, 1997, p. 28). Like psychoanalysis, consciousness-raising sought healing through disclosure, but its goal was to enact social change (Herman, 1997). The likelihood of the emergence of sensitive topics was another reason focus groups are used often in participatory action research with marginalized groups. Mason and Clemens (2008) note women who have experienced rape and other forms of trauma are “particularly vulnerable and marginalized” (p.71) because they especially have felt the effects of misogyny, sexism, and oppression experienced by women. Survivor groups work with the goals of FPAR to enable consciousness-raising and empowerment through discussions of their experiences as survivors and work in the garden. Since the participants have all experienced gendered violence and this project sought to understand the impacts on their experiences as survivors in relation to their work in the garden, sensitive topics did arise, but all felt our group was a safe space we felt comfortable disclosing our experiences. Throughout the project, each of

us at different times utilized our counselors as sounding boards for furthering processing of our discussions.

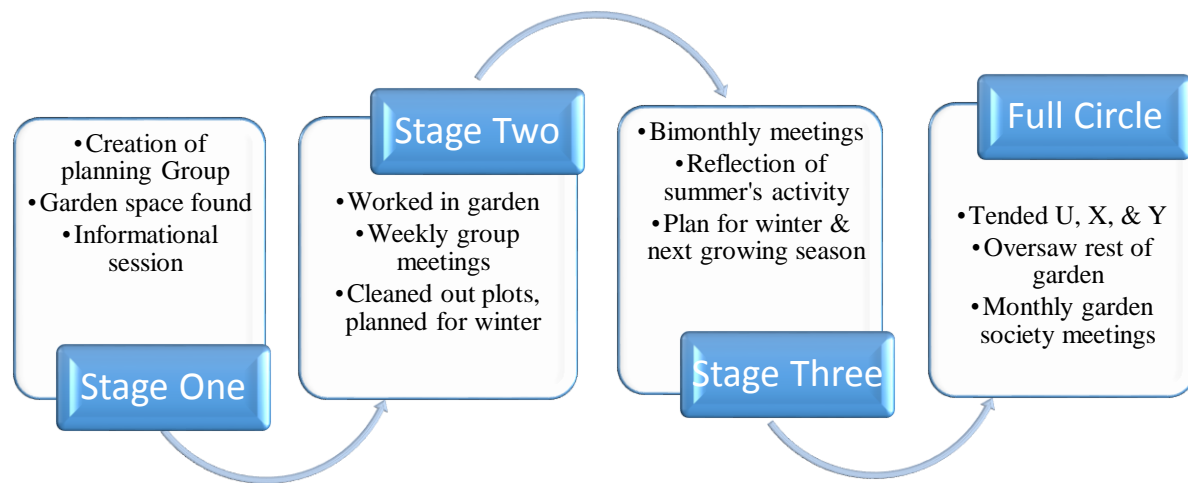


Figure 3. Research cycles. This diagram outlines the three stages of the garden research.

I took observational notes in order to provide further reflexivity, comparison points for analysis, and to strengthen the validity of my findings. Participant observation allowed me to make observations in the garden context group interaction as well as one-on-one. It also ensures that the project met the goals of FPAR of collaboration and collapsed the researcher-researched dichotomy. The time in the garden will also help to build rapport and trust with the participants, an important component of participant observation. By spending time in the garden, I also participated as a member of the healing garden and not solely as a researcher.

Stage One: Planning

The planning stage began in the fall of 2011 and continued through May 2012. In the beginning of this stage, contact was made with the volunteer coordinator at a local crisis center. The volunteer coordinator assisted in negotiating access to the organization in order to contact potential participants. A member of the faculty of North Dakota State University's Counseling Education department was also asked to assist during this stage. These two members, my advisor, Dr. Weber, and I became the core members of the planning group. We met one to two times a month between October to March to discuss different components of the research, including where we could find space for the garden, finding participants, and our visions for the project. In this phase, garden space was found at a local community garden sponsored by a local garden society. Three plots were allocated for the project in the spring of 2012. Our plots were in their alphabet themed garden where all plots corresponded to the letter in the alphabet and plants within the plots began with that letter. Our group was allotted plots U, X, and Y.

In order to gain access to potential participants, Dr. Weber and I met with Rape and Abuse Crisis Center's counselors. We presented the proposed garden research as well as the criteria for potential participants. For my research, I sought participants who were not currently in an abusive and/or unsafe environment to minimize risk to all involved in the study. Another related criteria for participation was participants must be out of crisis mode or in Herman's terms, in the third stage of healing thereby ready to discuss trauma on both a micro and macro level, in congruence with my goals for the study. Flyers with contact information for myself and Dr. Weber were given to the counselors. These allowed for anyone interested to contact us for questions or discussions about the research. Next, an informational meeting was held for those interested in participation in a group meeting room at the crisis center. Three women attended the

meeting and agreed to participate in the project. During this meeting, the project was explained, as well as my goals and visions for the project, but the collaborative, participatory nature of the research was stressed in order to open the door for their hopes, goals, and expectations for their participation.

Stage Two: The Garden

In the second stage, the group planned, planted, and tended the garden. The stage took place June 2012 to October 2012. Planning and planting took part as a group in order to build rapport and trust. During this stage, weekly meetings were held to discuss the impact of gardening, participation in the group, as well as our shared experiences as survivors. Also discussed were topics chosen by individual participants each week. After the majority of the meetings, as weather and time permitted we worked as a group in the garden. We also worked in the garden on our own as we each took turns tending to the garden throughout the week.

Stage Three: Processing

The last stage took place after the growing season beginning in October 2012 until Spring 2013. After a hard freeze, the group transitioned to this stage. At this time, meetings were held every other week. During these meetings we reflected on our experiences in the group and the garden as well as planned for the next growing season and potential activities in which to participate throughout the winter. Suggested potential activities included volunteering at the local YWCA and fundraising to raise money for supplies for the next growing season and to raise awareness of sexual assault, intimate partner violence, and family abuse. Our time together during this phase did not proceed past suggestions during this stage, much of our meetings were spent strengthening the rapport, trust, and support built during the growing season as well as lamenting the absence of gardening. During this phase, we no longer had regular topics for

meetings and data sources were primarily field notes, though four of the meetings were recorded and transcribed.

Full Circle: Planning and Planting Again

In early spring 2013, our group was asked to become co-coordinators of the Northern Plains Botanical Society. The remainder of the processing stage was spent preparing to take on that role as well as planning our plots for the growing season. At the end of this stage, which coincided with the end of data collection, Bryony decided to leave the group upon careful consideration. She stated she viewed this decision as the next positive step in recovering from her trauma. The 2013 growing season saw Hepatica and me primarily responsible for our plots. The responsibilities of co-coordinating the garden with the Northern Plains Botanical Society were largely mine. Fern's work schedule interfered with regular participation in the garden. Weekly meetings were disbanded, though Hepatica and I continued to work in the garden together as often as we could as well as attended the garden society's committee meetings and work days together.

Although AR in all its forms are concerned with the quality and trustworthiness of the knowledge generated, they do not evaluate the research using the same types of validity as traditional forms of research (Herr & Anderson, 2006). A "new definition of rigor" was deemed necessary for action research in order to avoid misinformation about or marginalization of action research. Herr & Anderson developed five validity criteria linked to the goals of action research: outcome, process, democratic, catalytic, and dialogic. Dialogic and process validity are associated with the goal of generating new knowledge; outcome validity to achievement of action-oriented outcomes; catalytic validity to the education of both researcher and participants;

democratic validity to whether the researchers are relevant to a local setting; and process validity to whether the methodology is sound and appropriate.

My research can be evaluated based on all five criteria as my project met each goal. Without a sound and appropriate methodology, my findings would be flawed. The localized solution I hope arose from my research was also an action oriented outcome, that the participants were empowered and healed through their relationships with their fellow participants, nature, and the larger community. Through this process I learned more about the issue of domestic violence and sexual assault, its impacts on individuals, and its connection to larger social forces; more about myself as a survivor; and more about my methodology and engaged with the research process. My participants also learned more about themselves, their trauma and its connection the social world, their fellow participants, and other topics they take from the project. As a thesis and as research on a topic with little attention, this garden research served to open the discourse on the healing effects of nature on survivors of sexual, physical, and mental abuse.

Analysis

I utilized the constant comparison analysis (CCA) method outside of a grounded theory (GT) context. For my use of CCA, I drew heavily on Fram's (2013) work with naturalist inquiry used in conjunction with CCA. She reviewed the literature on the growing use of CCA inside and outside of grounded theory. With the use of GT in various disciplines, the notion of CCA as a GT method has grown, but others have adapted its use. This allowed for incorporating extant theories and literature (Fram 2013). A theoretical framework can be used with CCA in order to maintain the etic (outsider-researcher perspective) as one develops a conceptual framework. CCA also maintains the emic perspective which prioritizes the emic (insider) perspective. CCA, with its focus on concrete and abstract levels, allowed for the transitions between insider and

outsider I experienced throughout my research, therefore it seemed only fitting for a method of analysis for this particular garden research. My use of CCA followed closely Corbin and Strauss's three stages of analysis: 1) open coding, 2) axial coding, and 3) selective coding. In open coding, categories were found. During axial coding the central category was determined as well as subcategories related to it. Categories were solidified during selective coding. Comparisons were made between participants' own responses in and across categories as well as with each other's responses. Responses were also compared to concepts within my theoretical framework.

During this open coding, my primary focus was to find and code data pertaining to my research questions while remaining open to other avenues of inquiry. Codes were then combined and assigned to broad categories. As I reworked categories and codes during axial coding, I made diagrams to make sense of the connections between categories. These diagrams aided in determining the central categories of this project (e.g. Figure 3, see below). *Trauma* became the primary category around which all others were connected. Another central category was *recovery* as the purpose of the research project was to further facilitate recovery and reflection on our healing journey. Towards the end of stage two and throughout stage three of the research process Herman's *Dialectic of Trauma* stood out as the primary sensitizing topic. As categories were solidified placing them as dialectics made the most analytical sense in order to facilitate a burgeoning conceptual framework for a survivor's healing garden. The dialectics aided in separating enmeshed topics. The dialectics allowed me to talk about these issues in a way that explained the way categories worked together and built upon each other. The central categories of trauma and recovery were combined into one with other themes associated with it. Upon solidifying subcategories which included reworking, renaming, and abandoning codes and

concepts, the following themes arose out of the data: *trauma and recovery: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection* as well as *group and garden: anxiety, benefits, and mindfulness*.

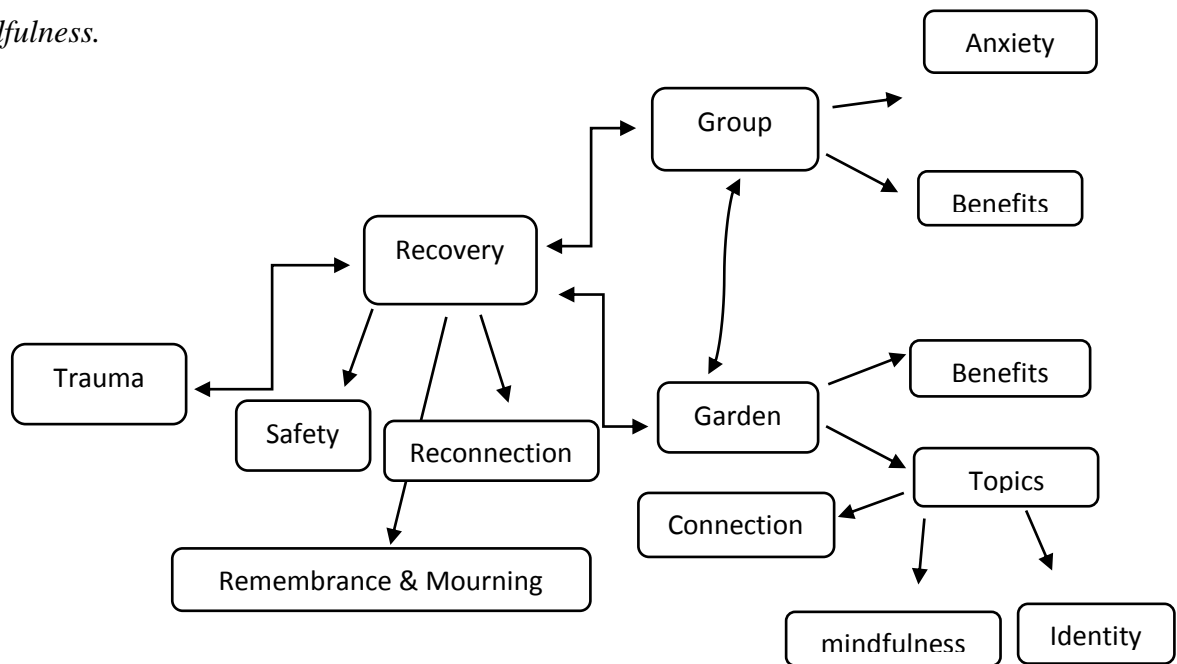


Figure 4. Axial coding. Connections between categories were made during analysis.



Figure 5. Our meeting space. A photograph of the gazebo near the garden where we met for our meetings.

CHAPTER 4: THE FRUITS OF OUR LABOR

The theoretical foundations of this garden research worked to support the creation of a survivor group based on connection. Herman and FPAR both worked in an “oscillating and dialectical” (Herman, 1997, p.155) process. The women of the Unicorn Healing Garden Project developed a *particular product* embedded in a space of healing. The garden project was a collaborative process focused on the establishment of a safe space for remembrance, mourning and reconnection, as well as provided benefits from active participation as a group. In the group, we shared our stories and developed a group narrative. We also dealt with anxieties manifested as frustration of the methodology. When the weather cooled, we mourned the loss of our space. As we navigated through circular stages and dialectics, the Unicorn Healing Garden Project blossomed.

Trauma and Recovery

Herman (1997) discussed three stages of recovery: 1) safety, 2) remembrance and mourning, and 3) reconnection. The healing garden engaged in these three stages throughout the project. For Herman, a safe space was with a therapist or counselor. For this research, the garden space provided a safe place for us to talk about our traumatic experiences. Throughout the conversations we remembered our trauma as well as its subsequent impacts on our lives. The last stage of recovery, reconnection, came in three forms: reconnection with ourselves, with other forms of abuse, and with the community.

Safety

Establishing safety is an essential part of trauma and recovery (Herman, 1997) and throughout the garden research safety was a primary concern. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman outlined three phases of safety for a survivor. The first focused on ensuring the physical safety of

a survivor. As the physical safety was established, safety transitioned to the survivor finding a safe space to discuss her experiences. Lastly, the survivor attempts to feel safe in a world where the trauma took place. These three stages were emerged throughout the research design. Careful consideration was given to who participate in the group in order to ensure the safety of all involved. As outlined in the methods chapter, the research design along with IRB protocols ensured we mitigated any risk to group members. The participants chosen for the healing garden were out of any possible danger from their perpetrator and out of crisis. Although the garden space was public, it was located on the property of a local children's museum and near a Humane Society shelter. The families and shelter volunteers who shared the space with us further established a sense of safety for our group. When we were not gardening, we met under a gazebo near the garden, but relatively separate from the other activities taking place on the grounds. The group acknowledge safety was an issue important to us all in the first meeting we started our weekly topics. As the weather cooled, we revisited safety in terms of space when we discussed new locations to meet for the winter.

Careful consideration was given to where we would have the garden and the fact that our space was public was one of our first discussions as a group. Bryony's concern for safety was related to the group, "I think for me, my only safety issue was anticipatory, like, oh, it's a group, am I going to fit in? Is this going to be the right fit?" The groups she was in prior to the healing garden had not "always gone so well" for her. Since she quit groups in the past, she was worried if this was not a good fit that she would quit again, leading her to feel disappointed in herself, "like quitter, quitter, quitter, quitter." Despite her anxiety, she stayed with the group for the summer and often took on leadership roles in the group such as doing research to help push the project forward and in the meetings ensuring everyone had their say.

Safety was a concern for Hepatica as a mother since she brought her daughter with her some of the days she came on her own. She did not feel she had to worry so much about in the garden. She said, “Well, Saturday I came with my 7 year old daughter and I was anticipating she would stay in the garden with me, which she didn't. So, I felt—I thought about the safety factors with her and, you know, of course with me as well, but probably more with her. But, everything was really low key.” The safety we felt enabled us to talk freely in our conversations despite being in a public place. As time went on, our concern about safe spaces to meet after we were done gardening became less of a concern as well. We chose to meet at a local coffee shop for approximately three months during the winter where we spoke as freely as we did while we were in the garden.

The purpose of the garden closely tied with the last stage of the creation of safety where a survivor comes to accept the world is an unsafe place, but it should not keep her isolated from people in the world. The reminder of the world as an unsafe space was quite apparent during our group after the community garden space was vandalized. Initially this shook the sense of safety we carefully cultivated through our meetings together. The garden was such a comfortable space most of the time that we were able to forget about any potential triggers it held. The vandalism left some plants in plots trampled, the sign posts which identified the letter of each plot uprooted and strewn about in the garden and its surrounding spaces. Bryony was the one to discover the vandalism and informed the police of the incident who disclosed this was not the first the garden that was vandalized. She was also the one who most explicitly expressed her feelings about the effects of the vandalism. When we met as a group a few days after the incident, she was still quite upset and angry at the perpetrators, which distracted her from our discussion topic that week. Although each of us felt disconnected from this place which held so much importance to

us, it was Bryony who started rethinking whether or not she should come to the meeting. “And then I thought: No, you need to be around people, especially people who understand to a degree why maybe I have been an ass lately or weirder than usual or whatever.” Through her time in counseling and the garden, Bryony began to understand how she reacted to triggers and to not isolate herself from those who could best understand the fear she felt as a result of the vandalism. As we left after some time in the garden, Bryony admitted she was glad she came and she felt much better for it.

The garden group was created with the explicit purpose of establishing a safe space to share our experiences and open up without the worry of judgment or blame. The vandalism reminded us that it was still a public space, and though we longed for control, we could not always have it. Our experience supported Herman’s third stage of safety, though. We knew we may not always be safe, but we were not always unsafe, either. The garden space and our group meetings provided the space to navigate that reality of public and private.

Remembrance and Mourning

The safe space to share our experiences facilitated the remembrance and mourning. Much of this stage happened for us in counseling, thus we remembered more than we mourned as we had reached some level of acceptance of the past and began to move forward. Mourning still occurred, though, as we discussed how our experiences shaped the way we navigate through the cyclical nature of the seasons and navigating our sense of self with others’ perceptions.

Remembrance for us included telling parts of our own story in the group, but it also transitioned to telling the story of the group. Disclosure of the group and our purpose was the topic of our first meeting after Hepatica encountered people from the garden society (who oversaw the garden space in which we had our plots) who were curious about who she was. She

explained we were part of a research study through NDSU, but was concerned about sharing too much without the consent of the group: “I just didn’t want to break the rules, you know?” In response to this I opened up the conversation to the group to ascertain their comfort level in regards to disclosure.

Byrony responded when Hepatica’s story with one of her own interactions with a garden society member. She said, “Yeah, it’s for women who have had some sort of trauma in their life and have—are in their various placed in their journey or their recovery or finding out who they are or whatever.” Hepatica explained she was open to disclosing who we were as a group, but did not want to break the rules of the research or say too much without knowing how the rest of the group felt. Safety was a connected issue to remembrance and telling our story and her reaction to the women from the botanical society was a feeling that they asked a lot of questions about who we were and what we do. “It was just like, woah, you know,” she said, attempting to articulate feeling uncomfortable by the intrusion of others into her personal experiences. In the end, we decided to use our judgment based on our individual comfort levels and using our instincts in regards to whether we felt whether each individual situation felt like a safe one in which to disclose certain aspects of our purpose.

Remembrance of our trauma throughout the group brought to light the level we were comfortable with talking about our own trauma. Although we were open about our experiences and trauma came up in many of our meetings, I found we rarely used the terms rape or abuse. Fern’s quote above was one of the few times it was explicitly referenced. Instead, we used terms such as “our experiences,” “it,” “the things that brought us [to the group]”, “those types of things,” “whatever happened to you in the past.” Although we shared our stories of trauma, we often switched to the generalized “you” in conversations or referenced other members’ stories to

make a point rather than our own. During our conversations when our discussions came to our own experiences rather than using rape and abuse other terms were used. This may be connected to our fear of disclosure and desire to remain safe. It could be residual shame that we held as we continually negotiated between trauma and recovery—even in the garden and group. We never knew how others would react to telling our stories, including friends and especially family members. The garden group was no exception. We mourned that disconnection from others as it reminded us of our difference from others. We feared others would not believe us, minimize our experience, or tell us to “get over it.” All were reactions we had experienced when we disclosed our trauma in the past. Although we were far enough into our healing journey to want to forge connections and reintegrate our identity, we still navigated the divide between silence and disclosure.

In *Trauma and Recovery* (1997), mourning came from coping with the loss of one’s self before the trauma. Mourning for the group came when we were unable to spend our time in the garden. During the winter we mourned the loss of the safe space we created. The garden helped us cope with our trauma triggers, but without it we could feel a difference in ourselves. Bryony shared in one of our last winter meetings:

I think last summer, like the days it was my watering day or the days we were actually going to be out there—that if there were other sad things going on the week prior to that or my anxiety or depression or whatever, I kind of looked forward to that or you could go out there whether it was your day or not. You could go out there and I would always feel so much better, but now in the winter time when you're--there's not that piece to look forward to

and the ways to deal with the anxiety or just feeling kind of blue or winter sad-ish,, And not being able to get rid of the anxiety and the rumination kind of hangs on. You know, there is an undercurrent there where I felt like it was resolved when I left the garden.

The benefits were apparent while we gardened during the summer, but the seasonal loss of that safe space meant we had to deal with issues the deeply felt issues of loss in ways similar to the losses incurred by IPV. The work in the garden group brought us further down our path of recovery and while we felt an emptiness without the garden we took its lessons with us in the future.

Bryony missed the work which provided a release of her post-traumatic symptoms and daily stressors. Hepatica missed the space for a different reason:

I miss being out in the public. Now I feel like I'm going back to isolating myself. And I committed myself to go to the garden every week or whatever it was. And I kind of miss that commitment and just getting myself out. That was probably the biggest reason why I started the group.

This quote echoed her discussion from the beginning of the summer where she explained her reason for joining the group. Hepatica stated she joined the garden research not necessarily to interact with other survivors at first, but more to get herself out in the public through the means of gardening the garden society's community space. In order to cope with the loss she felt in this area, she sought the connection with the public through making our group more established within the community. When the winter took our space from us, we lost a bit our momentum as a

group and therefore to some extent our identity as members of the Unicorn Healing Garden Project. We attempted to reconnect to this identity through bi-monthly meetings through the winter. These conversations focused on how to establish a presence in our community. Without our healing space to navigate between trauma and recovery our attempts at integration fizzled. The winter meetings brought to light as our summer meetings had the dialectical role between garden and group.

Reconnection

Herman (1997) wrote the end of the healing process emerges as the survivor learns to integrate her identity as a survivor with the rest of her identity. In this stage, she may decide to take on a survivor's mission. For some survivors, this materializes through a career in the criminal justice system or for others working with advocacy groups. My path followed similarly to what Herman outlined in *Trauma and Recovery*. Hepatica, Fern, and Bryony's paths were similar as well. We each experienced our own IPV, which brought us to a crisis center. This action facilitated the first steps of providing safety and remembrance. The integration of our identities began counseling and in different ways facilitated our participation in the garden. My survivor mission became the creation of the healing garden.

In order for a survivor to reach the point of feeling ready to embark on her own mission, she must begin her healing journey. This cannot happen in isolation. Survivors are empowered through the creation of connections (Herman, 1997). The garden research sought to enable those connections. It provided a safe space where connections with others could happen holistically. By this, I mean as integrated selves who saw the other members as whole people, not just as victims of trauma. The isolation we felt when we began the garden stemmed from the fear of interactions with others who may eventually find out about our subject positions as survivors.

We discussed in the group our anxiety over people treating us differently because of our past experiences.

The empowerment we felt in the group eventually inspired us to be less afraid to disclose our backgrounds when the opportunity arose. This was seen in an interaction Bryony and Fern had outside of the group when they ran into each other at a local restaurant while they were each out with friends. After the encounter between Fern and Bryony, each of their friends were curious about how they knew each other. Bryony explained she took a deep breath and matter-of-factly told her friend about the connection she and Fern shared:

And it didn't feel icky and because I'm private and just don't—I just have a hard time with how you explain it where it doesn't come out as that's you define yourself? Rather than how do you say it where it's a part of you that you acknowledge, but it's only a part of you. So, I thought it was actually a good circumstance, a good place because these are people [from her craft group] that I have been with since March and everyone's told a little bit more, a little bit more, a little bit more about themselves, but I felt ok doing it, even though I don't know every detail of their life.

Bryony's healing journey involved building connections through joining other groups where she could get to know other people in various ways, in this case an arts and crafts class. Through her connection with Fern and the group, Bryony felt empowered to share more of her past to someone she was getting to know. This above conversation also inspired me to incorporate Herman into the group since Bryony's experiences echoed another important connection for Herman (1997): connecting the identity fractured by trauma.

The fear Bryony overcame related to being seen as different because of her experience, rather than something that was a part of her, but did not define her, also resonated with me as it spoke to one of the reasons I wanted to create a healing garden group. I was also a woman whose traumatic past I accepted. Part of that acceptance was the realization that I would always be someone different because of it. Different from who I was, but also different from many other people in society. When I found moments where I could connect with someone else over our traumatic past it eased the isolation, shame, and guilt associated with my own trauma. Fern felt similarly, “This group is a really good influence on me spiritually, mentally, and just for my identity. Being a woman and finding a group where I actually fit in. It is empowering.” When I began to think of research for my thesis I wanted to create a space through it where women could come together not just as survivors, but women with a similar standpoint in which they navigate through life, including the numerous social structures which influence our daily lives. This desire spoke to the third stage of Herman wherein survivors work to integrate their identity as survivors with their identity as women. The garden research project provided a space where we could work towards that reconnection of self. The creation of this garden research project furthered my own reintegration of self as I was able to realize my survivor mission.

The garden space also created a connection between different forms of trauma and recovery at work in the same space we created for recovery. The community garden we were in was near a humane society and each day we met, volunteers walked dogs through the gazebo where we sat. The gazebo rested between the humane society shelter and the dog park. Therefore, each time we met, dogs walked past us. We connected to these dogs knowing that many of them were probably abused. Bryony said one day, “It makes me so happy to be here near all these dogs who are healing, too.” Another week, I made the connection between nature

as a healing too for people and pets, “Here is a puppy healing garden” right near our own healing space. Some meetings, our observations of the dogs were a simple, quick observations whereas other meetings their appearance in our meeting space distracted us for several minutes, but each time we made connections to our own trauma and recovery and the dogs.

A goal I had for the garden was to build a connection with the larger community. I foresaw that happening through some form of activism in which we took part as a group. We discussed volunteer and consciousness raising efforts which would bring attention to the issue of gendered violence as well as the project. Though these suggestions did not come to fruition, we did experience a connection to the community in different ways. For Fern, who had returned to Fargo after years of living on the west coast, she felt reconnected to her home town and felt able to set down roots again. The garden allowed to her see potential to create space in the city where she felt comfortable and accepted. She eventually became more involved in the local music scene and less involved in the garden. Hepatica and I took on the role of co-coordinator for the community garden where we had our plots. Bryony decided to leave the garden before we began our second growing season, thus I am unaware of her involvement in the community. Her decision to leave resulted from the reconnection of a sense of self not solely based on her identity as a survivor. Her recovery path led her to want to distance herself from the survivor label. She felt continuation in a group based on our shared traumatic past would not be the step forward she wished to take. She explained it was through her participation in the garden which made her feel strong enough to make that decision.

I created a garden to be a space of connections, a place to connect with other survivors, to connect our individual traumas with societal issues, and to further the connection between our identities as women who have survived gendered violence. The group and garden create the

particular product of garden research, but the group and garden were separate events which played off and supported each other. The research produced a wealth of data that supported existing research on the benefits of gardening. The research also produced a space for creating connections.



Figure 6. The UNICORN healing garden plots. From top left to right: yam vines, unicorn plants and ultraviolet marine petunias; from bottom left to right: xanthene gold marigolds, our “shrine,” and unicorn plant.

Group and Garden

The participants of the garden research were brought together because of our shared experiences with past trauma. Each of us were on individual healing journeys when we met. The

garden research was designed in order to facilitate further healing in a group setting. Recovery cannot happen in isolation (Herman, 1997), the garden provided a safe space for us to remove ourselves from the isolation caused by our trauma and its associated symptoms of shame, blame, and guilt. The garden and group facilitated further healing outside of one-on-one counseling. As I was deliberate about the participants who would become members of the group, it facilitated reconnection with others who were on the relatively same healing level and with place with the garden space. Garden and group created a dialectic where the healing which took place in one influenced the work we did in the other. Much of our reconnection to place came through our time alone, which provided space for our minds to wander and gain peace. Without the group, though, we would not have remained committed to the garden. It was in those weekly meetings where we could articulate the connections and reconnections we made between trauma and recovery, past and future, individual identity and community. Although in the summer we stressed the importance of weekly meetings in conjunction with the garden, it became apparent in the winter how much the garden impacted the group. Without the garden in which to work and a creative outlet to replace it in the winter, our meetings became less frequent and we noticed a change in our moods. The impacts of group and garden were very much oscillating and dialectical.

Although we were unsure and shy around each other and the participants unsure of what, exactly, the project entailed, we became a collaborative, cohesive group and the impacts of the garden influenced our lives outside of it. As I designed the study, I took to heart the literature which stressed the openness, fluidity, and adaptability of FPAR. Through active participation we collaborated on a project which provided us a space to be open and honest with each other about experiences both in and out of the group, prior and during. Out of these conversations came

topics of *frustrations and benefits* of the process of the group and the garden as well as *mindfulness* facilitated through gardening. It was through the process of mindfulness that we found ways to reconnect to ourselves and the community.

Anxieties of the Group and Garden

Based on my methodology, I wanted the project to be as collaborative as possible but the other members expected something more formal when they were informed about a study on the impacts of gardening. This caused frustration at first for the group and we felt the first few weeks the project stalled. After time together in the garden and our first group meeting where I was able to explain the process and my hopes for the garden, the frustrations subsided. As we became more comfortable with each other we fell into different roles.

One source of frustration was the openness of the project. The nature of PAR is to include participants in all stages, therefore I planned as little as possible to allow for the project to be built through collaborative participation. For the other members, they expected a more concrete, organized project where they would be more or less told what to do. According to one member, Hepatica:

I think at the beginning, I will admit, I was a little frustrated because of the lack of organization. It wasn't very organized at the beginning and it was a very slow start. I guess I'm more of an ok, I signed up for this, [so] I want to go for it and do it [kind of person]. So I just felt a little lagged. I don't know how to explain it, but it's getting better now that we got going.

For Fern, the openness of the project was seen as a hindrance stating, "It's so open that we can't move, so I'm just trying to chill out and see how it goes because I think it has its rhythm that we

can't write down on a piece of paper. So, it's been a slow process, but it's making sense more and more." At one of our last meetings it became apparent a source of the frustration towards the openness of the project was rooted in anxiety of the unknown the group presented, particularly anxiety toward interaction with others which went against Bryony's and Hepatica's nature to isolate themselves. Hepatica said when we reflected on the healing garden in one of our last meetings during the winter of 2012, "I, of course, had a lot of anxiety when I started the healing garden because I didn't know anybody." Bryony interjected, "But, you went!" This anxiety dissipated as the group interaction was facilitated through the use of FPAR methodology.

Frustrations were mitigated as we began to meet weekly, which allowed us to become comfortable with one another and carve out a space for ourselves within the group. We each had our strong suits and became leaders in that area. I was seen as the leader of the research, but once my vision of the group was shared I stepped back to allow the others to take the reign. . I provided topics, readings, and the initial leadership of being the researcher. In the garden both Fern and I were happy to be told what to do and where to plant. I also served as the liaison between the Botanical Society and the group. If I was in the garden and we were asked questions about who we were and what we did, those were usually deferred to me, particularly at first. As the first few weeks and rest of the summer progressed, Bryony became a researcher herself as she sought ideas for planning the current iteration of the healing garden, the potential for our garden including which plants we should have, and ways to become involved in the larger community through possible volunteer opportunities, such as a beautification project for one or two of the local women's shelters in the area. Hepatica took charge with design and can be credited for the way the plots were planted. Fern was the activist of our group and kept us focused on ways in which we could raise awareness about the issue of violence against women

and suggested the use of weekly topics in the group. Her enthusiasm was treasured by the rest of us

As individuals we struggled with the desire to isolate ourselves in order to preserve a sense of safety, but also longed to connect to others, hence our gravitation to the healing garden group. Membership in a group was not enough to mitigate the anxiety and fear itself, but took the formation of a trusting bond in a safe space to in time alleviate some of those feelings. The fact we each took the first step towards becoming a part of the group was the push we needed to become committed to overcome our nature to isolate ourselves due to fear and anxiety. In one of our last meetings, Hepatica credited the garden for going to other meetings related to gardening in the community throughout the area. Without the safe space to further her third stage of recovery, we may have stayed in our “safety bubble,” but the group proved beneficial in the facilitation of reconnection with others and the community.

The focus of the methodology on active, collaborative participation provided room for us to take on our roles in the garden and shaped the dynamics of the group. Although it at first was the source of our frustrations it also was a vehicle for us to achieve the benefits we felt while in the garden. Hepatica worried about being a “guinea pig” whose role in the research was to be observed and there would be little interaction. Our participation together facilitated conversations where we were able to make connections between ourselves, nature, and others we had in the garden. We brought those realizations back to the group which facilitated further connections and areas of introspection.

Benefits of Group and Garden

After the bumps were smoothed in regards to the group process, the benefits of the garden research were quickly apparent. The garden became a place of increased relaxation,

energy, and productivity. We expressed a sense of feeling better after our time in the garden. For Fern and Bryony, the act of gardening enabled a release of aggression and anxiety. We felt these benefits when we worked together in the garden as a group or in pairs, but especially when we were alone in the garden.

The first few weeks in the garden I made sure to be there whenever someone spent time there in order to build rapport with the group and further explain the research and my hopes for the garden project. We all mentioned how much we enjoyed the peace which enabled us to achieve mindfulness easier while we were alone. When others were present in the garden, it hindered our ability to gain peace, especially for Bryony. An older man who was a member of the garden society spent a lot of time in the garden as well, especially during the day when she spent time in the garden. He offered helpful hints about gardening and was very knowledgeable about the unicorn plants. Of these interactions Bryony said, “He’s not bothersome and he’s very knowledgeable, but when I left I didn’t have that same sense of working off a lot of energy.”

The rest of the summer we spent time in the garden as a group for about an hour after most meetings, the rest of the week we created a watering schedule. Meeting once a week as a group enabled us to feel the benefits of active participation in nature.

According to Fern:

[In] terms of coming here every Tuesday, [it] reminds me to stop, wait, like, “You have to go love the nature.” Because I have been working my butt off for, like, five days a week and then wearing your uniform, you’re surround by people who are complete strangers, and we’re living in cement, and you come out here and

all of the sudden you're like stop and wonder, oh yeah, I actually do exist.

When Fern was unable to make meetings regularly due to her work schedule. She said she felt depressed due to her absence from the garden and interacting with the group. For Fern and I that schedule ensured we made it out to the garden. Our schedules did not always allow a lot of free time to spend in the garden so we were grateful for the schedule as it ensured we made it out to the garden.

The garden also provided a sense of pride among the group. When visitors walked through the gardens they often stopped to comment on how well kept and colorful our plots were. The unicorn plant was also a draw for many due to its large stature and uniqueness. Members of the garden society informed Bryony our plots were cited as the favorites in the entire garden. Bryony explained why this reaction by others was so important to her, "I think when you have been through any type of abuse or in my case, you tend to think of yourself as bad because you were told you were or because you would be in trouble so you have this poor perception of yourself and then you put some plants in the ground and they turn into the most showy or the biggest and the healthiest." The pride was also associated with a sense of control. We could not control the trauma we experienced, we could not control what happened to our space, but we through careful cultivation we controlled our surroundings enough to make our plants grow.

Pride was also connected with the group. We each felt pride in ourselves for overcoming our anxieties to become part of the group. At one of our last meetings Hepatica called our group "a success." It was important for me to share the sense of accomplishment I had about the garden

with the group. The success of the garden meant more to me because it was done in collaboration with others.

When we spent time in the garden after our meetings, we left feeling uplifted and energetic. Problems that bothered us before seemed more manageable. Our time as a group enhanced the impacts of the garden and vice versa. We came to the group after our relaxing solitude in the garden ready to discuss the week's topics as well as our experiences in the garden. The group also kept us committed to the project and inspired to come to the garden. The group and garden facilitated our healing process as we felt pride in overcoming anxiety and fear to continue with the group as well in our ability to grow something beautiful after our traumatic experiences.

Mindfulness

Our time spent alone allowed for us to achieve a sense of peace, which inspired one of our weekly topics centered on the topic of mindfulness. As Jon Kabatt-Zin (1994) explained, "Mindfulness provides a simple, but powerful route for getting unstuck, back in touch with our own wisdom and vitality. It is a way to take charge of the direction and quality of our own lives, including our relationships with family, our relationship to work and to the larger world and planet, and most fundamentally our relationship with ourselves as a person" (p.5). Mindfulness described in such a way is applicable to the goals of recovery, as well as the garden research. Recovery focuses on reconnections which include with ourselves, with our loved ones, and with the larger outside world. The garden, when we were alone, provided a conduit to mindfulness.

The topic arose after Bryony was given information from her counselor on how trauma disconnects thought from feeling, therefore as survivors we have feelings or reactions to a triggering event without necessarily understanding the thought behind it. Triggered minds are

disconnected minds. When a survivor achieves mindfulness, her thoughts and feelings are reconnected and she can understand her reactions to events as a result from a trigger and incorporate coping mechanisms. In this meeting, Bryony provided a visual of this process, recreated below in Fig. 6. The garden worked to mitigate some of our stress through its mentally and emotionally restorative impacts.

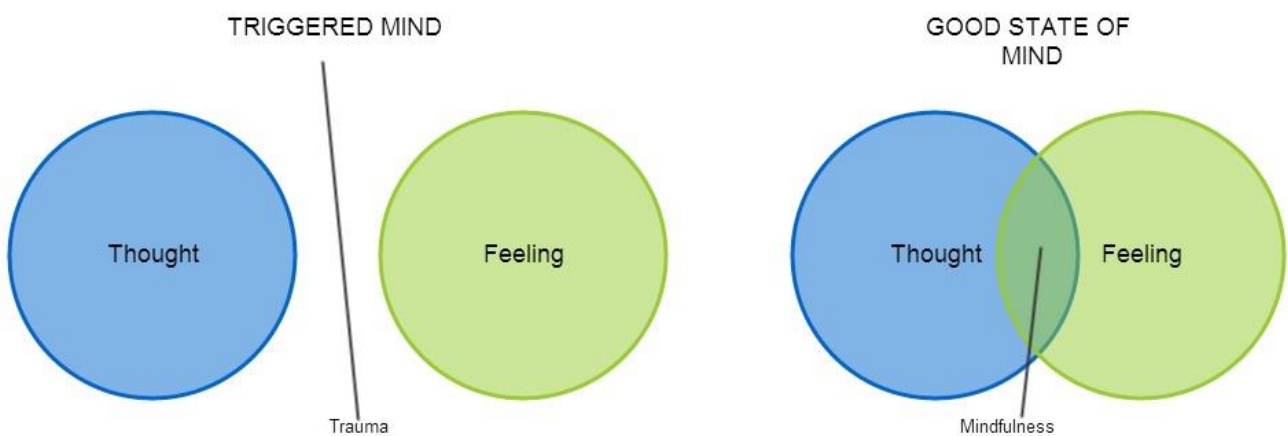


Figure 7. Visualizing mindfulness. This diagram was provided by Bryony in one of our meetings.

Through mindfulness one can *reconnect* the thought process. The topic also brought connections to my theoretical framework. Without reading Smith (1987) yet, Fern's idea of being mindful drew on the idea of standpoints. For her, mindfulness meant being aware we shared experiences, but there were also differences, therefore she wanted to remain true to both our subject position as survivors, but also the nuance to which our individual backgrounds contributed to our standpoint as survivors. Bryony saw the connection between mindfulness, recovery, and Herman (1997):

I think that, for me, anyway, it's [recovery] is a lifelong process and demented... You know, I'll always probably be in some kind of counseling because it seems like life events trigger stuff and then with that my responses are from the abuse... And like [the reading] that say the different stages [Judith Herman]—Well, for some reason I have gone all the way back to the first stage because of some things going on... things feel out of control that I have no control over in my life. So, this group is nice because it's not so enmeshed and it's just easier to be in and then you give us stuff that we can look at so someday we can go back and say, "Ah, that's why I don't feel good. This is why I don't feel right because I'm probably here because of this event."

I felt similar to Bryony after reading Herman (1997). The connections I saw between the text and our project brought me to the introduction of *Trauma and Recovery* to the group:

Reading [*Trauma and Recovery*], which draws parallels between all sorts of abuse and trauma I felt as I understood why I have been acting in certain ways... I would get triggered by certain things and

I would get frustrated over why I was doing that or why I was acting that way and it was helpful going to counseling and finding out why—it all made sense...And I'm not sure if it's in the section I had you read, but integrating your identity as a survivor and being a whole person, I feel like I'm getting to that point. It has probably been two or three years where I've been living in survivor mode and I'm ready to integrate my identity and start living at a higher level. So, I think being part of this group—and even doing this research—I feel like if I had tried doing this two years ago, I probably would have never succeeded. So, doing this group—I feel like I did it, I prove some people wrong and stood my ground.

Mindfulness helped us in our integration of the self as well as we became aware of our triggers, accepted we may always have triggers, but can identify them and cope with them which will aid in becoming a whole person ready to reconnect with the world outside ourselves.

Fern's take on mindfulness again reflected her desire to be sincere and accurate in interactions with others:

So speaking of interaction and mindfulness can I just kind of share what Ok, this is what I wrote, "Community interaction and mindfulness: How to be mindful when interacting with other people, it's what we learn in kindergarten to be kind, to be thoughtful and I can't believe that everyone shares the same values, beliefs, education, profoundness, shallowness, etc. I got to

be more aware and sensitive that people will not or do not see things the way I do. So how do I interact with others knowing this? How can I create and explain our part of reality in a very accurate manner? Being at the healing garden you randomly meet someone or see someone who kind of want to know who you are, so when I do talk to other people, when I share with other people I want to respect other people's experience while being truthful and accurate and unbiased to our experience knowing that our experience is really unique and individual. So what is the answer? Be mindful."

Whereas for mindfulness for Bryony focused on building connections between herself, her trauma and recovery, and the garden Fern wanted to gain mindfulness through her interactions with others including the members of the group as well as others who may be curious about who we are as a group.

Despite enjoying our time alone in the garden, we did see it as a tool for connecting with others. During our time in the garden we interacted with Botanical Garden Society members as well as patrons of the neighboring Children's Museum who perused the space. The latter interactions facilitated a sense of pride as we either observed or were told how much our plots were enjoyed. Children and adults alike gravitated to our plots and at times asked questions about the plants growing in them, especially the unicorn plants. Others were also intrigued by the name xanthene gold for our marigolds. Although there wasn't always direct contact in these moments, we still felt a connection to those who utilized the space.

When winter came and the gardening was no longer a part of our weekly activities, we noticed a difference in our demeanor. In one meeting, Bryony remarked we seemed out of sorts

that afternoon and Hepatica thought maybe it had to do with the lack of tending to plants. Our hopes was to have each member grow yam vines from those in our plot indoors during the winter, but attempts at transplanting vines failed for all but Bryony, thus leaving us disconnected from nature. This suggests gardening has immediate and long lasting effects on an individual as long as exposure to nature is consistent. Fostering a continued connection to nature during the winter months is an important consideration for future research on healing garden groups.

With so much talk of the future and the excitement of all throughout the summer, fall, and early winter I thought the sustainability of the group was guaranteed. By the next summer, only Hepatica and I were actively involved with the group. Bryony felt to further her healing journey was to move beyond identification of a victim or a survivor. Involvement in the group made her feel as though she would not move forward in her process, but she explained that without the group she would not have felt able to take the next step. Fern found other ways to connect with herself, others, and the community and chose to focus on those activities rather than the garden. Hepatica and I took on the role of co-coordinators of the community garden, but no longer met weekly. Hepatica noted at one point during this time she did not feel as connected to the garden as she did the previous year and attributed it to the group no longer meeting. The status of our collaboration for the 2014 growing season is uncertain. This strengthens my belief continued meetings throughout the winter and some form of connection to plants, gardening, or active involvement in the community is important to sustainability of a group such as this.

Trauma and recovery were the reasons we came together as a group. The research facilitated sharing our experiences which furthered our healing process. At first Bryony was concerned the group would solely be focused on talking about our experiences. She asked me the first time we spent together in the garden if we would have to share our stories. I explained the

garden was created to provide a safe space for those experiences to be shared if we desired, but it was also meant to be a safe space to reconnect with others who would not make us feel shamed or uncomfortable if the topic arose. I hope the conversations about our trauma and recovery would arise organically, which they did. Many of our conversations turned to our experiences during our weekly topics. As I hoped, though, we were able to share our stories in a matter of a fact way which reflected our place in the recovery process where we had begun to integrate our identities. We came to the group at a time when we felt less fractured as people.

As a group of survivors, we developed a garden group which enabled us to navigate through the dialectics of trauma and recovery, as well as group and garden. Throughout our time together we developed a narrative, an empowering activity meant to overcome the shame of silence and the dread of disclosure. As we built this dialogue, we remembered our own stories, at times mourning the loss of identity. This loss of identity due to trauma was alleviated through the reconnections made between self, other survivors, and community. While we grew as a group, we saw our plants in the garden flourish. Their growth resonated with us as we worked through the dirt and the impacts of our past trauma. Our time in the garden furthered our recovery work in the group. The garden and group provided a safe space for us to further our healing journey while coping with triggers.

CHAPTER 5: OUR STORY

This chapter delves deeper into the story of the Unicorn Healing Garden Project through a series of vignettes. The decision to use vignettes arose out of my difficulty to navigate separating out themes in order to write about them and the desire to highlight the collaborative, participatory nature of the group. The previous chapter established the core themes found in the research, but it is the ways in which these themes worked together, building reconnection and recovery, that makes the garden project a healing project. Telling one's story is an important process of recovery and giving participants an authentic voice is important in the FPAR process. Through the use of vignettes, I am able to tell our story as participants in a healing project “credibly, vividly, and persuasively” (Sandala, 2003, p.219). Vignettes come to researchers from ethnotheatre (Sandala, 2003, p. 217):

As working definitions, ethnotheatre, employs traditional and craft and artistic techniques of formal theatre production to mount a live performance event of research participants' experiences and/or researchers' interpretations of data for an audience.

My ethnodrama, or script, are the vignettes below in which the members of the Unicorn Healing Garden Project enact definitive moments of the dialectics at work in the research: trauma and recovery, garden and group. Through specific events and engaged dialogue that is part of the collaborative and participatory nature of FPAR, I am able to capture the ways in which these dialectical relations flourished and waned over the course of our work together.

Reconnection: Identity and Creativity

The group and the garden was a place of trying to reestablish a connected and cohesive identity because our identities fractured in the aftermath of our trauma. One of the areas that we hoped to reconnect to through our healing journey was creativity. For each of us creativity was an important part of our how we understood and expressed ourselves and we wanted to reintegrate back into our lives. Fern focused on the connection of creativity with mind and body. This began the conversation flowing towards the trauma on our bodies which caused our creative-identity disconnection.

Fern started our conversation on creativity with a quote from Rollo May's *The Courage to Create* (1975). She began, "I don't know if you've heard of Rollo May, he's a philosopher and he talks about creativity and then he defines what creativity, or what courage is, and there's five or six different ones and it's really interesting, like for example the first one is what is courage? What is physical courage? What is moral courage? What is social courage? And then he talks about creative courage, what does it mean? So, I was kind of excited that we were talking about creativity right now because it does stem from courage." After a pause, she continued, "So for me, it takes a lot of courage to verbalize or be vocal about how I really feel about the world and then you were like you should do something creative about it and use that anger to be creative. And so, this book right here is kind of like a reflection of what I have been thinking about since last week. And then in relations to the things we talk about most of the time, our experiences with rape and physical abuse, and this talks about physical courage. It says, 'What is physical courage? [...] I propose a new form of courage of the body. It's the use of the body not for muscle mass, but for the cultivation of sensitivity. This will mean the development of the capacity to listen with the body. It will be learning to think with the body. It will be a

valuing of the body as a means of empathy with others, as an expression of the self, as a thing of beauty, and as a rich source of pleasure.’ It also says the physical body is not something [with which] to intimidate other people, but to be able to be creative and use it so it is healing for everyone else. So, that’s another way to be creative, to use your body.” She concluded, “So, that’s what I have been thinking about.” In the garden we used our body for healing when we worked in the group when we planted, weeded, and watered. It was a physical form of courage to be creative in the garden, to step out into the world and out of isolation in order to form connections to ourselves, other individuals, and our community.

Reconnection with my creativity came through teaching myself how to knit as a way to create and relax during a triggered time before the garden. My thought process about the topic brought me to a comparison of the garden and knitting, “When I first was learning how to knit it was very frustrating because I was constantly making mistakes, but as I continued I learned to let go of that need to have it be perfect all the time. It was kind of like the garden which was frustrating at first because of the time constraints and the plants didn’t seem to do so well at first and I didn’t know what was going to grow and what wasn’t but not everything is growing so well and it feels like I have accomplished something. It’s the same with knitting like, ‘Wow, I made that myself.’ At first I didn’t see the garden as creative, but everything that goes into it...I think now that it’s creativity and it’s so nice to be here and be creative and let my brain shut off for awhile.”

This reminded Hepatica of the conversation we had the week before as we first started talking about creativity. We suggested the weekly topic as we always did, but some weeks we began to discuss the topic chosen for next week right after we designated for the next week. Bryony suggested creativity as a topic and when I asked her to clarify what she meant by

creativity she explained, “Creativity as a way of healing—because for me the whole abuse thing and surviving it is all about being in control. And then I find every now and then if I can let myself go, then I can get on this creative thing and go from A to B to C to D to E and all these thoughts which has worked well in the past in jobs, problem solving and one thing and another, but sometimes it’s kind of hard to get out of that I have to stay in control and I have to stay very rigid and squared off, you know, in order to keep everything together and so maybe just be—

What else could be healing gardens? Because maybe it’s [she turned to Fern], your words somewhere and, [then turned to Hepatica], it’s your designs somewhere and it’s doing anonymous flower bombs downtown. But sometimes I think creativity is just freeing to get rid of that rigid, controlled piece of yourself: This is what I can do and this is how I can affect the community and make your presence known rather than stay so rigid and in control about things. [But because of the abuse] Because it tend to get very stunted, not that it’s not there, but it’s hard to get it where,” she turned to Hepatica and said, “I think of you as being creative all the time, in a structured way.”

Hepatica responded, “Well, you’re right about abuse stunting creativity because it does stunt you, you really can’t think of other things like what is appropriate and what you were doing before—it’s all a mental thing. Obviously, abuse takes its toll. You know what you put yourself to is all is all part of the healing, too. So, it’s not always there. It’s all how you define creativity, not how you make creativity, but how do you get it? Maybe that’s what we should talk about.” A week later, Hepatica reconnected us to this conversation and connected it to the literature Fern shared with the group, “I know we talked about, like, what happens to creativity if you happen to go through abuse and I think that I probably was not creative and I stopped everything at a traumatic moment in my life because I would have to focus on myself and getting back to—

because creativity really takes your whole body and your whole mind, to really—you really do have to put yourself in a place to be creative, and so I think from when I stopped being creative—because it did happen to me—is quite a few years where I wouldn't do anything. I didn't garden, and I liked gardening. I mean just vegetable gardening and all of things I liked to do just stopped and then when you gradually get back into it it's that—just being out here and knowing and realizing, like with design and stuff and seeing people walk by and not interacting it kind of clicks, 'yeah that's why I could be so creative and that's what I knew about creativity,' and you know, it can kind of bring you back into where you were before and where you might want to be. And so, I guess I was thinking about connecting creativity and what happens to my creativity. And I think everybody has some kind of creativity, however you want to look at it.” Through her reflection on the week's topic she also made connections to the garden. The garden was a space for us to feel safe and reconnected with what it means to be creative and how that was/is an important part of ourselves and our recovery.

In the recovery stage as outlined by Herman (1997) reconnection meant, “The traumatized person recognizes that she has been a victim and understands the effect of her victimization” (p. 197). The group allowed us to articulate the effect of trauma on our creativity where as the garden was a space where we could reconnect to that creativity through its design. Again, we navigated through the dialectic of trauma and recovery as we realized the effects of trauma and how we cope with those post-traumatic symptoms through different stages of recovery. The garden and group worked as a dialectic which allowed us a space to reflect and a space to discuss our lives post-trauma. The conversations we had about creativity spun off into us enthusiastically brainstorming ways in which we could be creative in the community and bring healing gardens to others whether that be through plant bombs or a metaphorical healing

garden where we cultivated our personal, internal gardens through serving the community via volunteering projects.

Reconnecting in a Safe Space

Identity, interaction, and reconnection were intertwined throughout our conversations. These topics arose in our first meeting as we were discussing safety and our comfort level with disclosure about our project and purpose. Hepatica, Fern, and Bryony had just shared their concerns, anticipations, and experiences in relation to safety. The conversation allowed a space for me to explain part of my purpose and hope for the project.

“One of the reasons I wanted to start this group is to provide a safe space where it [our trauma experiences] just kind of comes up and it kind of ebbs and flows. When we have our conversations, if it [trauma] comes up, it comes up, but in our interactions—there’s the idea that this is why we came together, but it hasn’t been the focus of what we’ve been doing, either. So, it’s a safe space if you do want to talk about those things, but we don’t always have to talk and focus on the issues which brought us together, which I like. I know that if those things do come up, this is a safe space to talk about them, but we can also have interactions outside of our personal stories and get to know each other as whole people. The isolation of trauma was something I experienced, telling friends—if it just came up in conversations, the reactions to me made me uncomfortable: feeling sorry for me or changing the way they see me, whereas here if it comes up, then, you know, we’re all people who just have had those kind of situations.”

Bryony added, “Well, and I think this takes you a step further down that path to whatever happened in your past doesn’t define you, it’s just that part of you, which I all these years later tend to struggle with that, tend to fall back into that old stuff where this is, it’s just part of who you are, but it doesn’t define who you are.”

“Kind of integrating that thing that, yes, my life changed since those moments,” I said, “since those experiences I had, but that doesn’t mean it has to define everything else. That’s what I like, too, and being able to get a community together of people with shared experiences.” The conversation began with Hepatica’s concern for confidentiality which I returned to after our discussion of safety, which led us to discuss safety in terms of disclosure. “But, you had a question, Hepatica, about confidentiality?”

She responded, “Well, someone from the garden society started asking me a lot of questions about where I came from and why I was there and who I was—and the organization I was with. So, I said NDSU, and then we’re doing a research study and then I started thinking, oh I hope I’m not blabbing too much. And I don’t know what everybody else knows about it, if I should be saying that or—you know she also asked me, ‘Well, how many people are working in the garden?’ Like, woah, you know? So, I just didn’t know who much information to give out.”

I opened up the conversation to the group so our decision to disclose would be one we made together in congruence with the collaborative nature of my methods. Fern, our passionate activist, jumped in first with a response, “I feel like in order to raise awareness socially we have to talk about it. People need to see it. So, just being—experiencing rape and abuse, I don’t think I should be hiding that. I think I should be talking about it to say it does exist and guess what we’re doing about it? Making plants, getting together. How amazing is that? As opposed to if we were really secretive about it, I don’t know it’s almost like we are hiding our identity from public view, but that’s just me. The same concept with any phobias in society, well we have to talk about if we’re going to normalize it. I think we should say that this is a healing garden for women who are going through this kind of experience and healing together and here we are.”

Bryony also brought up an interaction she had with a member of the garden society, “Well, when I talked to [this member], I had a feeling she knew quite a bit. You know, like where the people had come from and what the whole project was about, but I could tell she wasn’t quite sure because she goes, ‘I know,’ It wasn’t—she didn’t say—it wasn’t anything bad, but you could tell she was trying to be diplomatic. She didn’t say ‘people like you,’ but it was something to the effect of ‘with your experiences’ and ‘I heard such wonderful things and the YWCA might even get involved and wouldn’t it be great if you could expand it into the community’ and she goes ‘I just think it’s a wonderful thing.’ What I said to her was, ‘Yeah, it’s for women who have had some sort of trauma in their life and have—are in their various places in their journey or their recovery or finding out who they are or whatever.’”

I reiterated to the group I wanted it to be a group decision whether we disclosed who we were as a group. We decided it would be on a person-by-person basis where we would trust our own instincts with the people with whom we interacted based on our own comfort level. The conversation veered back to safety, though, when Fern added, “I could feel it if someone is open I’d be more than willing to talk, but I’m also concerned about the safety thing, too. Like, yes I could be totally proud about what I’m doing, but at the same time some people aren’t right. Some people might want to make fun of us or not take you seriously, but I’m sure it’s not going to be like that all the time. I’m also concerned about my own personal safety, physical safety. I think that the bottom line it’s just a person by person thing.”

Bryony added, “I pay attention to my antennae because they’re pretty in tune, too.” By this, she referred to her “safety antennae” which kept her aware of her immediate space and the people around her on a daily basis, including the garden. “There were some guys who came into the garden by themselves and I didn’t know if they were just looking or if they were here for

work and I was over near our plots and they came in on the other end. I just saw them out of the corner of my eye and then once I knew they were there then I kept looking, but I didn't find myself to be my super hyper-vigilant self when I working for like an hour or two when no one was out there, but once I noticed someone then it was watchfulness."

Our conversation came full circle. We began with safety, which led us to a conversation about disclosure. How and where we disclosed was related to safety, but also connected to our identity and how we wished to interact with others. People who utilized the garden space impacted the way in which we interacted with the garden space. Alone we did not feel the need to be hyper-vigilant and could fully connect to the healing space, but when others came to us to ask about our place in the garden or wandered around it sometimes disconnected us from the peace we experienced in the garden. Other times we enjoyed people in the garden, but like the example above showed we became uncomfortable at times with men in the garden, but when women and children would come to the garden was when we would smile, wave, or engage in conversation with others. The garden provided the space for us to experience issues of connection, but the group provided a safe space to articulate our feelings and reactions to those moments.

This vignette highlighted the way trauma and recovery, garden and group formed dialectics. We experienced moments in the garden space which triggered our hyper-vigilance and distrust of others. One aspect of establishing safety according to Herman is about navigating trust and distrust. Herman (1997) wrote on completing the first stage:

Little by little, the traumatized person regains some rudimentary form of safety, or at least predictability, in her life. She finds, once again, that she can count on herself and others. Though she may be

more wary and less trusting than she was before the trauma, and though she may still avoid intimacy, she no longer feels completely vulnerable or isolated...In her relationship with others, she has to learn to be both appropriately trusting and self-protective (p. 174).

The garden and group provided a safe space to continue our work on establishing safety where we could work through our anxieties about social situations while also being a space that tested our recovery daily through interactions we could not control. The group became a space where we as survivors found people to be a source of trust and support while we navigated the uncertainties of engaging with a public space. In our social interactions with the group and the larger community we circled through the first stage of recovery, safety, again and it will be an area we as survivors will constantly negotiate.

Reconnection: The “Real World” and Our Safe Space

As inspired as the conversation of creativity made us, a few days prior to our weekly meeting to discuss creativity again, the vandalism to the garden space occurred. I delve deeper here into the impacts of the vandalism because it was a traumatic event in the development of the garden and our recovery that disconnected us from our space and required us to draw on our recovery work and yet again reconnect to the group and garden space. Trauma and recovery are oscillating and dialectical because recovery is an ongoing process that must incorporate the lived reality that could trigger that original traumatic experience. The incomplete nature of recovery means that in the group, there were events that challenged our cohesion and development as a group, but also created challenges to our individual recovery process. The vandalism was something that challenged us but it also demonstrated how far we had come in our recovery, the

strength of the group, and the power of this garden space that we created together. This was particularly the case in Bryony's insistence that this event play an important role in the research findings in this thesis. In this way, the collaboration process associated with my method still occurred as the members of the group informed the creation of this particular product of garden research.

The evening we came together after the vandalism incident we sat under the gazebo as usual. The garden space was not within the garden space, but it was near enough for us to see the garden as we spoke. We seemed a bit distracted [and hesitant?] because we knew we would find remnants of the abuse to our healing space. With a lull in our conversation about creativity I asked Bryony if she had anything she would like to add. She responded, "Well, I was just really into looking at different things that people do with healing gardens in different forms and fashions and one thing and another. And I tell you coming out here Saturday morning and seeing what those little shits had done kind of put the kibosh to all of that because it's like [frustrated noise]."

Hepatica added, "It's almost like we feel like we're making a difference in the community and then they come in and destroy that, so I mean what do we do? Do we just stop for them because that's their intent?"

It's just flowers, "Bryony said, "and—I took it very personally because X [plot] was the one with our little shrine you know where people were dropping stuff off there and it's like they're so insecure—and then I tried to think about how maybe they're damaged, too, and then I thought, oh to hell with it. I'm just going to feel bad about this. And that of all the things that they chose to strew things about and smash it. That they knew that meant something to someone

and that's how petty they are and that's what their intent was. And then my counselor said, 'Oh, they're too stupid to even think that deep. Don't give them that much credit. It was just there.'"

"And the X looks so nice," I added, "and we just feel so proud of it, to the point where people are connecting with us by putting little things in our shrine, to have them go after that. Yeah, when I got that email I was just like you can't help but not take it personally. It infringed on this feeling of safety and it gets to the point where I've had enough stuff—someone coming in to my life and taking advantage or deciding that I don't care about your feelings, I don't care about you and it's just like one more thing, another big middle finger from the universe."

After we took time to mourn the damage to the garden and the loss of our safe space, we went to work on our plots as we did every week where we were able to repair the majority of the damage to our plots with the exception of one of two trampled marigolds. Bryony shared that she was tempted to not come that evening, but she knew it was important to be around people who would understand her feelings about the event and where people "would understand why I'm being an asshole or being weirder than usual." She expressed she was glad she came and working in the garden as a group allowed for reconnection to our space and to deepen our connection to each other. Though it would have been easy for any of us to give up on the garden after such an experience, our place in the healing journey allowed us to return to the garden, build a new connection to it despite its damage and to learn how to feel safe in it once again. Just as we integrated our survivor identity into our post-trauma self, we had to reconnect to the garden in a similar way as it had become a survivor or trauma as well.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The healing garden research was a *particular product*, which provided evidence for the potential to create support systems to facilitate further recovery. Those who are no longer at risk or in crisis, as were the participants in this project, would be good candidates for this type of group. It is a group for those who have for the most part cycled through Herman's three stages of recovery and seek ways to continue to heal in a collaborative, participatory social setting enabled through Feminist Participatory Action Research methods. While participating in a healing garden research project, it is suggested individuals still be in counseling or led by a counselor. This provides additional support for any potential triggers that may arise within or outside of the group. As this garden demonstrated, though, when far enough in the healing process, a counselor-facilitated group was not necessary if she is in or has access to a counselor outside of the group setting. The focus of garden research such as this should be to facilitate the transition to the third stage of healing (Hermann, 1997) and possibly, for some, out of counseling. Its purpose and goals are to work on connecting with oneself, other survivors, and the larger community. Its purpose is to further the growth of survivors of IPV. It may also become a participant's "survivor's mission" (Hermann, 1997) or inspire one of their own.

Although there were many documented benefits of this garden research, there were limitations to this research. The group was small and therefore generalizability is not possible. While I wanted to ascertain the impacts of gardening and group participation separately early in the research process, as the project continued it was apparent that the benefits of each were often inseparable. The group and garden formed a dialectic that informed and enhanced the impacts of the other. Hepatica stated that if the healing garden would continue next summer without the group meeting component she would probably not continue. It was spending time with the group

along with the gardening that made the project beneficial. More research on the benefits of interaction with nature and healing gardens needs to be conducted with survivors in order to understand the impacts as well as provide potential for generalizability. Future garden research for survivors of IPV would benefit from finding ways to cope with the circular nature of gardening in order to continue the work of the garden and group. Sustainability is an important aspect of FPAR, therefore developing creative outlets for active collaboration within the community is important.

Historically, science has either ignored or misrepresented the experiences of women (Smith, 1996). Shifts in research have provided a space for the voices of traumatized women. Women's standpoint theory inserted the experiential knowledge of women into social science. Feminist participatory action research worked to further include the voices of women into discursive formations while attempting to reduce the hierarchical divide between researchers and their subjects. With the inclusion of the voices of women who have experienced violence, the physical, physiological, and social impacts of their trauma were brought from the private to the public sphere. A wealth of literature on the positive impacts of nature exists. These impacts have been studied in a wide range of populations, most recently in those who have experienced trauma from war experiences. Less is known about the impacts of exposure to nature on survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence. Grounded in the standpoint of survivors and participatory action research, participation by survivors in a community garden may reduce the mental and social impacts of their traumatic experiences, while also foster empowerment and community integration. This research provided insights on the perceived benefits of participation in developing a garden, gardening, and its use as a transition group. The localized solutions in this research were action oriented outcomes. The group established relationships in order to create a

community of interest as survivors as well as make connects with our community of place, and act as a source of support as we continue to move through the stages of the healing process.

There are many avenues for further garden research for survivors of trauma which could provide answers to questions which arose of this project. What would a project look like with participant collaboration from research design through the end of the project? With a larger group? In what ways would having a garden space separate from a community garden affect the impacts of a garden research project? What would be the benefits of becoming involved and therefore more integrated and visible within the community in which the healing garden is embedded? How can sustainability be maintained, particularly in areas where the growing season can be short?

Though it raised many questions, the research was valuable as it built on the current knowledge about FPAR, group work, and the healing process. Explicit in this work was the process by which the Unicorn Healing Garden Project was created. Although FPAR stresses process, it is not always documented in the literature. Not only was it documented throughout each stage, transparency about the frustrations and the ways FPAR can adapt in light of these frustrations was an important aspect of the research. This group also provided further support to Herman's argument for the separation of groups into different purposes based on stages of healing. Previous groups did not work for the participants because there were other members at various stages of healing. Part of the success of this project was all of the participants were ready to transition into the third stage of healing. Another important consideration of this research is the concept of recovery. We discussed our healing process as journey where we may find ourselves at different stages, it will never end. Recovery implies an end to the healing process where one moves on from the traumatic past experience and becomes healed. Rather, our group

explored the idea of healing where we continue to navigate the dialectic between trauma and recovery as we cycle through the three stages of healing at different places of our journey. This opens up another avenue of research possible from this project: the problematization of recovery and the conceptualization of the healing journey.



Figure 9. A garden view. A photograph of our Y plot featuring our yam vines.

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APPENDIX: INFORMED CONSENT

Title of Study:

Developing a Healing Garden for Survivors of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault

This study is being conducted by Audrey Putz and Christina D. Weber. To contact Audrey, you can contact her via email at: audrey.putz@my.ndsu.edu. To contact Christina, you can contact her via email at: christina.d.weber@ndsu.edu

Why am I being asked to take part in this study?

We, Audrey Putz and Christina Weber, are conducting research to investigate benefits, if any, that exist in the participation by survivors in developing, implementing, and care taking of a healing garden. As a survivor who utilizes the services of the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center, you have been selected as someone who was thought to be a good candidate by your counselor and has expressed interest in participating.

Invitation to participate/voluntary choice:

We invite you to take part in our study. You are not required to participate and may choose whether or not you wish to participate. You can change your mind, or quit, at any time without penalty.

Explanation of procedures:

During the research study there will be weekly focus groups wherein the group collaborates on design, planting, and routine care of the garden, as well as talk about your experiences from participating in the project. The meetings will be audio recorded, and we will take observational notes in the meetings and the garden.

Place and Time of Procedures:

The focus groups will meet once a week at the NDSU Community Counseling Center, 1919 19th Avenue North Fargo in the Stop 'N' Go Center. The focus groups will take approximately one hour. The garden space is located in the Botanical Alphabet Gardens located at 1201 28th Avenue North Fargo. The amount of time spent at the garden is flexible depending on your availability.

Confidentiality:

Recordings, transcripts, and notes will contain pseudonyms and all identifiable information will be removed and/or changed in order to ensure confidentiality.

What are the benefits to me:

Throughout the project, there are a number of potential benefits. You may continue and/or enhance the growth and healing process in which you are engaged in counseling. You may also gain knowledge on a variety of topics, such as nature in general and gardening more specifically, yourself and your experiences, other survivors and their experiences, your community, and society. You may also form bonds with your fellow group members and/or your community.

What are the benefits to others:

The other group members may experience similar benefits as you. Also, in the research findings, the potential benefits include providing others with information on developing healing garden projects in other communities and for various groups.

What are the costs to me:

Although discomfort or cost will be minimized as much as possible, there may still arise. Participation will entail a time commitment. Due to its purpose of developing a healing garden for survivors, sensitive topics may arise which could prove triggering. Participation means agreeing to continue your healing process with your counselor at the Rape and Abuse Crisis Center in order to process experiences which may prove to be discomforting, upsetting, or triggering.

What if I have questions?

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the research study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have any questions about the study, you can contact the researchers, Audrey Putz at audrey.putz@my.ndsu.edu or Christina D. Weber at christina.d.weber@ndsu.edu.

What are my rights as a research participant?

You have rights as a participant in research. If you have questions about your rights, or complaints about this research, you may talk to the researcher or contact the NDSU Human Research Protection Program by:

- Telephone: 701.231.8908
- Email: ndsu.irb@ndsu.edu
- Mail: NDSU HRPP Office, NDSU Dept. 4000, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050.

The role of the Human Research Protection Program is to see that your rights are protected in this research; more information about your rights can be found at: www.ndsu.edu/research/irb.

Documentation of Informed Consent:

You are freely making a decision whether to be in this research study. Signing this form means that

1. you have read and understood this consent form
2. you have had your questions answered, and
3. you have decided to be in the study.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Your signature

Date

Your printed name

Signature of researcher explaining study

Date

Printed name of researcher explaining study